

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Krishna, the Butter Thief.** John Stratton Hawley. Princeton University Press, 1983. Pp. 415, black and white illustrations, 39. Price not stated.

From the bland assumption of myth as other people's superstition, we have grown—thanks to the work of people like Jung, Campbell and Eliade—to the realisation that it is often a profound sensing of the hidden realities of existence and their seizure in the language of poetry. But myths differ widely in the range of human experience they embody and the depth to which they penetrate. The Krishna myth is one of the greatest traditions of world myth. The *Mahabharata* discloses him in Kurukshetra, as existential a setting as Calvary, his form growing to fill the sky in an apocalypse of a vast cleansing in blood and tears as a prelude to fresh beginnings of redeemed history. A totally different Krishna is glimpsed in the lovely Prakrit lyrics of Hala Satavahana, gains deep allegoric meaning in the *Bhagavata* and warm sensuousness of romantic episode in the *Gita Govinda*. The muse of St. John of the Cross and the musings of Teresa of Avila can resonate to this Krishna. But there is yet another role of Krishna for which a parallel is difficult to find in European religious and artistic tradition. This is the child Krishna with his infinite pranks.

While God as the father is a familiar concept in many cultures, one scarcely ever sees it expressed with the tenderness of this Vedic prayer. "Stay still, do not go away! With this sweetest song I grasp your garment's hem as a child grasps his father's robe." But the astonishing development, unique to India, is the reversal of roles in this relation. For another Vedic poem rises to the supreme height of tenderness and describes itself as the mother, and God as the little child she fondly embraces. This was the germ of that unique tradition where devotion took the form of tender affection for God conceived as a child (*yatsala bhava*). And thus we have a vast treasure of poems, stories, songs, paintings and sculptures where Krishna is represented as an incredibly mischievous child whom his foster-mother Yasoda had often to spank even though she immediately smothered his wails with her kisses. An episode frequently recurring in this tradition is Krishna's stealing of butter of which he was enormously fond. It is on this episode as it is treated in various ways in poetry, primarily of Surdas, the blind poet of Vraja, and other arts that Hawley has concentrated.

One wishes he hadn't. For he has two serious handicaps that make him

flounder badly in trying to understand the mood of this tradition. In the religious art of the west to which he is conditioned, the shadow of the cross falls on the cradle, the Pieta is a more central motif than the Madonna and Child and even in the representations of the latter, a sensing of the awful end broods over the visages of both. Mary was never quite at home with this life, apparently her life renewed, which sailed into the orbit of her destiny from unknown seas. In many paintings she too kneels with folded hands at the foot of the crib. The naughty and therefore profoundly human child and the mother who spans him would be totally unassimilable for any one nurtured in this tradition except through a very great effort of the imagination.

Hawley does not even try. And this is because the shade of Freud possesses him like an incubus or succubus whichever of these weird types is more deadly. Though Freud once conceded that there are moments when a cigar is just a cigar and not a phallic symbol (a great relief for this reviewer, a chain smoker of cigars), he regretted the concession and made thorough amends. And he is the deity of a whole host of researchers who in some respects can outdo him. Sex, rather hair-raisingly involved even for me who knows my Vatsyayana as well as my Krafft-Ebing, came out like a hot blast when I had to review Wendy O'Flaherty's book on sexual metaphors in Indian mythology. In the blurb to Hawley's book, she praises it as a major work of scholarship and Hawley has cited her with all the respect due to a pathfinder. And in this book, he sees a thick deposit of sex below a thin layer of butter.

With his low I.Q. the present reviewer cannot hope to summarise the dizzily brilliant interpretation of Hawley. But since he is being paid for this review, he has to make an honest effort. The mother dominates the Indian household and the growing child. "The boy child's task of both breaking and maintaining his bond to the opposite sex is not easy." And this difficulty, it seems, is reflected in a dominant antinomy of Indian mythology: the ambivalent evaluation accorded to heat; as *Kama* it draws the sexes together; as *Tapas* it liberates the ascetic from sex. Hawley cites O'Flaherty's finding that Siva solved the problem of relating to the opposite sex by living the life of both *Kama* and *Tapas*. Wanting to match that profound analytical achievement, he says that Krishna also managed this. For butter symbolically means semen; rather confusingly, he also says that milk out of which butter is produced is the juice of femaleness. He admits that none of the people in India with whom he discussed all this saw any such relation between milk and butter and what he says they stand for. But, then, "the Victorian sensibilities of present day educated Indians make it hard to discuss the libidinal aspects of Indian religion with them". To hell with them, says the indomitable Hawley and proceeds inexorably to his conclusion. "When Krishna steels butter, then, he is spilling the juice of femaleness, broadly conceived. In one sense he is partaking of it freely. His appetite is

without limit; if there is butter to be had, he will take it." But doesn't this make him a sex maniac? What about the ascetic bit? Oh yes, Krishna shows how independent he really is by refusing to accept butter, this female juice stuff, when it is openly given to him. Who can say now that Hawley's Krishna is not as good as O'Flaherty's Siva?

Maslow once wrote that when he read behaviourist and psychoanalytic accounts of the process of growing up, he was convinced that none of the writers had ever studied a child growing up. If one reads the lore about the infant Krishna without any bats in his belfry, one can easily see that what we have here are amused and tenderly human accounts of the pranks of a high-spirited child. His fibs when he is caught are Falstaffian, meant to amuse by their wide improbability rather than to deceive; the women of Vraja can scarcely hide their smile when they complain about him to Yasoda; and not being a Freudian, these complaints about her brat secretly amuse and delight her instead of making her read un-Victorian symbolism into milk and butter.

Nothing like a sense of humour as an antidote for pretentious self-deceptions. It is with a smile, compassionate and yet amused at the complicated and self-deceptive psychologising of Arjuna, that Krishna begins the Gita discourse. But if he could read Hawley, he would guffaw right till Hawley's next book comes out. We want more books of this type. For these are difficult times and the hilarious, even when wholly unintentional, should be welcome. For serious analyses of myth, we can always go to people like Campbell or Eliade.

*Krishna Chaitanya*

**Dance and Music in South Asian Drama:** Report of Asian Traditional Performing Arts 1981, The Japan Foundation, 3-6, Kioi-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102, Japan. Price not mentioned.

This handsomely brought out report on Chhau, Mahakalipyakhan and Yakshagana by the Japan Foundation relates to the event which dealt with the interrelated field of music, dance and theatre, the theme of Asian Traditional Performing Arts (ATPA) seminar held in Toyko in 1981. Earlier the themes were the musical instruments (1976) and 'the voice' (1978).

Essentially the report is in the nature of documentation of the third project of ATPA. The editorial committee admits that the ideal of maintaining a balance between the public performances and related events for the benefit of the Japanese public and the seminar-workshops with related documentation for the benefit of the researchers and scholars throughout Asia and the world, has proven problematic.

The merit of the report lies in the avoidance of superficially Japan-centred attitude. The selection of rather homogeneous traditions from a single large geographical area of South Asia has allowed for comparisons in concrete and direct terms and since the documentation is realised in terms of 16 mm films both of the performances and the seminar-workshops one interested in further investigation will have access to this material. The report consists of four sections which deal with the introduction to traditions presented, seminar proceedings, individual research reports and appendices. The last consists of mask catalogue, Yakshagana song texts, dance notation, details of ATPA documentation of 1976, 1978 and 1981, glossary-index and a genealogy of Hindu dieties with illustrations.

The details of Purulia chhau and Seraikella chhau are by now familiar to the readers and sufficient work has been done in the three forms of Chhau viz. Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Purulia. What appears to be more interesting is the documentation of *Mahakali Pyakhan* of Nepal. The Hindu kingdom at one go reveals the strong links with the Indian forms.

*Mahakali Pyakhan* is a dance-drama based on chapter 67 *Durga saptashati* of the *Markandeya Purana*. It was composed between the 14th and the 15th Century and was transmitted to the Kathmandu valley and is performed during *Indra Jatra*, a festival which takes place during the farmers' slack season for eight days from the end of August to the beginning of September. People from each village gather in the city of Kathmandu and perform *Mahakali Pyakhan* together with *Lakhe*, the *Bhairava* mask dance and the *Kumari* festival. The story of *Mahakali Pyakhan* originates in a passage from the myth of world creation. In this story the goddess Mahakali, Kumari and Mahalakshmi symbolize the good aspect of man, while Madhu, Kaitabha, Shumbha and Nishumbha symbolize the evil aspect. In its full form it is performed by 22 performers and the performance follows the principles developed in olden times.

After dancing, the performers do *puja* before returning their masks. The groups which performed in Japan belonged to Bhaktapur. Any one who wishes to perform can become a member of the group by taking one year's training under a qualified leader called *musyakhur*. The Nepali government bears the expenses of the group and when the amount is not sufficient then donations and gifts are accepted.

The second section contains individual papers by the scholars. Among them Dr. Suresh Awasthi's overview of traditional dance-drama in India is a comprehensive study of various traditions. Konishi Masatoshi's *Masks and Masked Performing Arts in South Asia* concentrates on the masks used in Chhau traditions of Seraikella and Purulia and also makes references to the masks used in *Krishnattam*. Whereas Honda Yasuji's paper on *Similarities in Asian Performing Arts*, from a Japanese point of view gives several

references of mask traditions in Japan. The similarities with the masks, its qualities and symbolic values and the elaborate make-up in Yakshagana are taken into account by the author. Also the stage setting in Yakshagana and in *kagura*, the worship of the masks in Japan and other similarities are emphasised. The technical aspects of music of Chhau and Yakshagana are well documented and discussed threadbare. The study is scientific and is a rich contribution to a comparative analysis. The dance notation is analysed carefully with graphs and dance terminology. These are the best results of such detailed work. And the report serves as a model for similar workshops.

A chapter on the rhythm and drums in Badagtittu Yakshagana dance-drama deals with various instruments and varied *talas*. The costumes and make-up of Yakshagana, the various stages of make-up and putting on the crowns are all thoroughly documented and with excellent illustrations the text is embellished in a manner which does justice to the subject.

The last section is interesting from the point of processes involved in making the masks and in general serves the purpose of easy references with detailed bibliography and a glossary. The exhibition of Asian Masks which was held along with the seminar and the detailed cataloguing, the illustrations and the notes would help research scholars a great deal. The Yakshagana song text of *Abhimanyu* with English translation is excellent and similar work should be done in India in Yakshagana to reach wider public. The colour plates are superb and the printing flawless. The Japan Foundation has done a commendable job and there is enough for others to learn in terms of completing the proceedings of several similar workshops and seminars organised in India at different points of time. What is exemplary is the teamwork of a specialised editorial board which has spared no pains in making the report as perfect as possible and doubtless added to the existing knowledge on the subject by providing a valuable reference work of high merit.

Sunil Kothari